

ACHILLE-ADRIEN PROUST, M.D.:  
DOCTOR TO RIVER BASINS

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THE father of the great French novelist Marcel Proust was the distinguished physician and public health official, Achille-Adrien Proust. The son apparently thought highly of his father's medical abilities and would often suggest to friends that they consult the latter about such disparate ailments as an ocular cyst and a cardiac disorder. If any friends complained of not feeling well, he would ask them naively, "Would you like Papa to come to see you?" He made this suggestion to the great Anatole France, of whom he was a devoted admirer. France, with his customary wit, replied, "My dear young friend, I should never dare to consult your father; I'm not important enough for him. The only patients he takes on nowadays are river basins!"

Dr. Proust, born on March 18, 1834, was the son of a shopkeeper in the small town of Illiers, near Chartres. He was apparently a good student, for he won a scholarship to the high school in Chartres. In that city he obtained his baccalaureate in letters and science. His father had hoped that he would become a priest, but Adrien Proust preferred medicine and left Illiers to go to Paris to become a physician. His doctoral thesis was on "Idiopathic Pneumothorax." He was graduated on December 29, 1862. The following year he was appointed Chief of Clinic at the Charité Hospital. Three years later, after an examination, he won a state license to teach in university schools of medicine.<sup>1</sup> At this time a great cholera epidemic occurred, the third of four which have afflicted France. The fatality rate was about 50%. Dr. Proust played an active role in caring for the sick, and distinguished himself by his devotion to duty and his disregard of personal danger. Since the medical treatment of cholera was inadequate, he became dedicated to the idea that prevention must be the goal.

Proust decided to apply this principle to the prevention of cholera. He stated, "The question of international hygiene passes and surpasses political frontiers. . . . Egypt is Europe's barrier against cholera." In 1869 the minister of Agriculture and Commerce sent Dr. Proust to Iran to discover the routes by which previous epidemics had spread through southern Russia and the rest of Europe. His efforts were recognized in 1870 when he received the red ribbon of the Legion of Honor from the Empress-Regent Eugénie. In the same year Dr. Proust married Jeanne-Clémence Weil, the daughter of a wealthy stockbroker; she was 15 years his junior. On July 10, 1871, Marcel Proust was born.

Dr. Proust distinguished himself as a teacher, a practicing physician, an epidemiologist, and a writer on medicine. He wrote on international hygiene, tuberculosis, rabies, deficiency diseases, paralysis, nervous and cerebral maladies, aphasia, and occupational disorders, including lead poisoning. He rose to the rank of Commander of the Legion of Honor and in 1879 was elected to a seat in the Academy of Medicine, replacing his teacher, Dr. Ambroise Tardieu. He became Inspector General of Sanitary Services in 1884, and in 1885 he was appointed Professor of Hygiene (Public Health) in the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Paris.

Dr. Proust is probably best known in medicine for his single-minded devotion to achieving the exclusion of cholera from the borders of Europe. At several international conferences he campaigned actively for the institution of the *Cordon Sanitaire*. Because of the opposition of England, the International Sanitary Conference held in Rome in 1885 did not accept the principle, but in 1892 at Venice, and the following year at Dresden, unanimous agreement of the other great powers was obtained. Later in the same year England accepted the agreement and the International Office of Public Hygiene was formed in Paris. Aiding Dr. Proust in his successful effort to secure international agreement for the control of epidemics was Camille Barrère, a political figure who became ambassador to Italy from 1897 to 1925. Barrère is also remembered as the original of M. de Norpois, the politician and diplomat in Marcel Proust's great novel, *Remembrance of Things Past*.

Not as well known among his achievements, but of considerable interest, is the monograph which Dr. Proust wrote in collaboration with Gilbert Ballet, titled *Treatment of Neurasthenia*.<sup>2</sup> The authors

describe neurasthenia as being characterized by insomnia, dyspepsia, headache, irritability in general, and "weakness of nerve elements." They thought that depression as a source of fatigue was more significant than brainwork, and they considered emotional strain the main source of neurasthenia. The usual causes of nervous exhaustion, they believed, were vexation, anxiety, disillusionment, remorse, thwarted affection, and other forms of sorrow and disquiet. Life in high society was said to figure among the possible causes of great pressure. These symptoms were strongly reminiscent of those experienced by Dr. Proust's celebrated son Marcel, who may well have served as a prototype for some of the ideas expressed in the treatise. Another important paradigm was Dr. Proust's sister, Elizabeth Amiot, who is the Aunt Léonie of *Remembrance of Things Past*. Elizabeth became an imaginary invalid and, like her nephew Marcel, was a voluntary prisoner. She took to her bed, where she remained for many years, and allegedly subsisted largely on vichy water, pepsin, lime tea, and madeleines; the latter were the famous cakes which inspired her nephew's explorations of involuntary memory. Although neurasthenia was popularly regarded as hereditary, Proust and Ballet state (page 12), "Among the diseases of the nervous system, neurasthenia is one of the least dependent on heredity." Of interest too is the fact that they describe a situation where a mother lavishes excessive affection on her child in the mistaken hope of giving him security. This, of course, parallels Mme. Proust's relation with her son. Both the grandmother and the mother were overanxious, overprotective, and overinvolved with Marcel.

Just as Marcel and his aunt probably provided subject matter for Dr. Proust's book, so too, Marcel in all likelihood was influenced in his writing by Dr. Proust's discussions, knowledge, and insight into the nature of neurasthenia and the neuroses. According to M. L. Miller, Marcel Proust's utilization of the concepts of repression, his recollection of repressed memories, and his free association stemmed from his own profound intuitive insight plus some actual knowledge of Freud's early ideas as they began to be published.<sup>3</sup> Like his aunt Elizabeth, Marcel became a recluse. In his later years he spent much of his life in his famous cork-lined room, allegedly because of his asthma. Miller points out that several fictional doctors in Marcel's novel expressed attitudes which resemble statements in the book on neurasthenia by his father and Ballet.

Dr. Adrien Proust was a contemporary of Sigmund Freud and possibly was influenced by him; moreover, he was familiar with the German as well as the French medical literature. However, the monograph on neurasthenia contains no mention of Freud. The book has great interest in its own right as one of the important early works on neurasthenia. It is also important because of what it reveals about Marcel Proust, whose notorious eccentricities could not have failed to influence the authors. Dr. Proust was greatly concerned about Marcel's psychoneurotic illnesses as well as by his homosexuality and bronchial asthma. Marcel regarded his father with respect, devotion, and some fear. Although the son was proud of his father's achievements, their relation was never close and there was often conflict between them. Dr. Proust does not seem to figure significantly in the rather contemptuous portrayal of physicians in his son's great novel. Just as many patients may hold their own physicians in high esteem but harbor great antagonism toward doctors in general, Marcel seems to have exempted his father from the disdain which he manifested toward the medical profession.<sup>4</sup> Marcel's brother Robert, who also became a distinguished physician and was held in affection by his older brother, does not figure in *Remembrance of Things Past* at all.

Many famous physicians were guests at the home of the Prousts and served as originals of the doctors portrayed in *Remembrance of Things Past*, especially for such characters as Dr. Cottard, Dr. Du Boulbon, Dr. Dieulafoy, and Professor E. Probably the main inspiration for Dr. Cottard—that ignorant, insecure social climber whose pomposity, sneers, jealousy, simplicity, and feeble witticisms are important in the novel—was Dr. Eugène-Louis Doyen (1859-1916). Doyen, a celebrated surgeon, was notorious for his brutality, his tactlessness, and his ignorance of cultural and social matters. Like Dr. Cottard in the novel, he was known to have referred sneeringly to Potain, the esteemed diagnostician, as an old fool. The well-known Dr. Auguste Broca, another surgeon, also served as one of the inspirations for Dr. Cottard. He had a penchant for amusing his students with puns, stale jokes, and oaths. (This Broca is not to be confused with his father, Pierre Paul Broca, the famous surgeon, anatomist, and anthropologist who discovered the speech center known as Broca's area or convolution.) Another inspiration for Cottard came from the society physician, Dr. Samuel Pozzi. Dr. Le Reboulet, a favorite physician of the

aristocracy of the Faubourg St.-Germain, served as the model for Proust's Dr. Du Boulbon. Another friend of Dr. Proust, Dr. Albert Robin, is alleged to have told Marcel Proust, "I might be able to get rid of your asthma but I wouldn't advise it; in your case it acts as an outlet, and saves you from having other diseases." Dr. Robin was well known for the eccentricities of his prescriptions; he was alleged to have told an old lady who supposedly needed to exercise her muscles and lungs, "You must take off all your clothes and then hop around a table six feet in circumference, eating an artichoke one leaf at a time," according to a story told by Léon Daudet.

George D. Painter, one of Proust's biographers, believes that the mingled admiration and contempt with which Marcel Proust treats the medical profession in *Remembrance of Things Past* is a reflection of Marcel's ambivalent feelings toward his father.<sup>1</sup> Marcel wrote of the elder Proust: "You . . . can have no idea of how kind and simple he was. I tried, not to satisfy him—for I well realize that I was the dark spot in his life—but to show him my affection. Nevertheless, there were days when I revolted against his too great positiveness, the too great confidence of his assertions."<sup>5</sup> Dr. Proust was also a generous and indulgent parent who despaired of his son's abnormalities. Usually sober and deliberate, he occasionally had outbursts of rage, especially when confronted by examples of Marcel's great extravagance, and he was prone to make sudden and arbitrary decisions relating to his son. Proud of Marcel's literary career, he had high hopes that the son would be elected to the *Académie Française*. Apparently Dr. Proust was puzzled by his son's popularity in high society and by his interest in it. The father too was concerned with "that double-headed monster of damnation and salvation—Time."<sup>6</sup> In a prize-giving speech that he delivered at Illiers (which is the Combray of his son's novel) he said: "The emotion I feel on coming to your school sixty years after is something you will perhaps fail to understand, not because at fifteen one is less intelligent or comprehending than at my age; on the contrary, I think one is able to understand a great deal more in boyhood. But there is one thing which is a closed book to the young, or which they can only guess at by a kind of presentiment, and that is the poetry and melancholy of memory."<sup>7</sup> It is easy to see that the profound insights of the son owe much to the wisdom of the father.

After a busy and productive life, the renowned physician died sud-

denly of a stroke on November 26, 1903. He was 69 years of age. In his eulogy at Dr. Proust's grave, Professor Georges-Maurice Debove, the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, said, "He was skeptic enough to be indulgent to people who led what we like to believe is a path of virtue, epicurean enough to enjoy life without taking the petty miseries of human existence too tragically, and stoic enough to face death without flinching."<sup>1</sup> It is ironical that Dr. Proust, who was among the most famous French physicians of his day, has been almost forgotten. Despite his important work as epidemiologist and as co-author of a basic text on neurasthenia, he is remembered chiefly as the father of the great novelist. Although he is described in his son's autobiographical novel, he is not depicted as a physician. The fictional father lives on while the eminent epidemiologist recedes into *Time Lost*. This recalls a favorite theme of Marcel Proust: "Memory is the only preserver of time; art is the only preserver of memory."

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